

NOTRE DAME FOODSERVICE EXPLAINS HOW AND WHY IT DECIDED TO STAY WITH CONVENTIONAL CAGE PRODUCTION EGGS

Note: Through the UEP Certified Public Relations program, UEP Certified was a sponsor at the National Association of College and University Foodservice (NACUFS) annual conference. The following is a report of a presentation made at the conference by University of Notre Dame Foodservice executives explaining how and why they chose to continue using UEP Certified conventional cage production eggs in spite of student and activist pressure in favor of non-cage production eggs.

July 27, 2006 – University of Notre Dame Foodservice executives today outlined some of the issues facing many college and university foodservice directors today in a presentation to the National Association of College and University Foodservices (NACUFS) annual convention entitled “Issues Surrounding Cage vs. Cage-Free Eggs.”

The presentation by Jocie Antonelli, R.D., manager of nutrition and food safety, and Dan Crimmins, director of purchasing for Notre Dame documented the campaign waged by some students at the university to get Notre Dame to only purchase cage free eggs. It also showcased the efforts that the university’s foodservice department made to investigate the issue and make their decision, which was to continue to serve only conventional cage production eggs.

Jocie is a registered dietitian with a B.S. in dietetics from Indiana University. She has been with Notre Dame for ten years and is responsible for nutrition and food safety. Notre Dame has 11,200 students, 7,800 of whom are undergraduates. Unlike many other universities, 80% of the students live in on-campus residence halls all four years. 6,800 students purchase on-campus meal contracts from the university. 80% of the students are Catholic, and the university has a strong history and commitment to campus life and social causes.

The foodservice department formed a Social Responsibility Committee in 2005 consisting of Jocie, Dan, their executive chef and their senior associate director. Some of the issues that the committee has worked on include organics, local purchasing, sustainable seafood, pandemic planning and other societal and environmental issues.

STUDENT ACTIVISTS’ CAMPAIGN

Jocie explained that a few students formed a group called ND For Animals and provided the university’s foodservice department with a 15-minute video purporting to show cruelty, filth and disease in egg laying hen houses. The students asked that the university switch to cage free eggs.

The student group presented a 5-point document outlining arguments for Notre Dame to use only cage free eggs. These arguments included claims that cage free eggs are higher quality (they are not) and that the Better Business Bureau has ruled that the UEP Certified label is misleading (it has not).

The students also claimed a moral, ethical and religious basis for the university to be opposed to cage production eggs, even claiming a Papal quote on the topic to support their position. The students also were advocating one specific cage free egg supplier/brand that they wanted the university to utilize. The activists also published a full page ad in the campus newspaper featuring the Papal quote, and one of the activists wrote a letter to the editor with their views.

NOTRE DAME INVESTIGATES

Rather than relying strictly on the video, which was produced by the national activist group Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), Jocie and her committee decided to visit their current egg supplier as well as two cage free suppliers. They invited two of the students to come along. Jocie indicated that, based on the video, she was not looking forward to the farm tours. However, she was pleasantly surprised by what she saw on her visits to the university's egg supplier, Creighton Brothers in Northern Indiana.

“We saw four to six hens per cage, with each hen provided 67 to 72 square inches of space, with 24 hour access to food and water, protection from predators, cages which were stair-stepped to prevent any manure pass-thru from one cage onto the next, plenty of bright lighting which mimicked normal daytime/nighttime patterns,” Jocie said. Creighton Brothers participates in the United Egg Producers Certified program (www.uepcertified.com) which requires producers to provide scientifically-accepted allowances for cage space, air, water, feed, lighting and other animal husbandry and welfare criteria. Inspections for UEP Certified producers are conducted annually by USDA personnel or the independent testing company Validus. Jocie showed the NACUFS group several photos taken at Creighton Brothers farms, which she said differed greatly from the images she had expected to see based on the HSUS video.

The Notre Dame group also visited two cage free egg suppliers, each of which had 20,000 hens. “What many people think of when they envision a cage free farm is a red barn, blue sky and green grass,” Jocie said. “But in reality their environment is not that much different than the ones we had seen at the conventional cage production facility. While there were no cages, many of the hens were huddled together at one end of the hen house; so while they had more open space, in practical terms they weren't using any more space than the hens in cages. And unlike the cage system where the manure drops into an underground pit, these hens were walking around in what is called a ‘deep litter system’ which allowed them to be in constant contact with their feces. And we saw firsthand what the phrase ‘pecking order’ means. It means that some of the hens actually peck or attack other hens. This is why their beaks are trimmed (not cut off) just after birth, both in conventional cage and cage free production systems. There was no natural light, just artificial; the air quality seemed worse to us, because the hens are walking around and kick up a lot of dust. In fact, many of the workers were wearing masks. The ammonia smell also seemed stronger to us than in the conventional cage production, perhaps because of the deep litter system.”

Jocie said that the cage free system did allow for more opportunity for the hens to demonstrate some natural chicken behaviors like scratching or dust bathing.

ND Foodservice also spent a lot of time discussing the moral, ethical and religious claims made by the student activists, Jocie said.

“We found out that the quote the students were attributing to Pope Benedict XVI came when he was a Cardinal, so its relevance should be relegated to a personal opinion rather than a Catholic doctrine,” Jocie explained. “And we thought his negative connotation of animals used in production agriculture could be equally applied to hens living in the cage free environments that we visited.”

The Foodservice Committee also found clarification and guidance from the Catholic Catechism which reads in part:

“God entrusted animals to the stewardship of those whom He created in his own image. Hence it is legitimate to use animals for food and clothing...Medical and scientific experimentation on animals, if it remains within reasonable limits, is a morally acceptable practice since it contributes to caring for or saving human lives...It is contrary to human dignity to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly. It is likewise unworthy to spend money on them that should as a priority go to the relief of human misery. One can love animals; one should not direct to them the affection due only to persons.”

“We decided that the religious issue was a neutral point in our review,” Jocie explained.

The university had their chef test both varieties of eggs and he found no difference in their culinary performance. There also is no difference from a nutritional standpoint.

“We then looked up the definition of humane in the dictionary, and discussed the quality of life issues for hens,” Jocie said. “While we believed that the quality of life might be slightly better in the cage free system, there was no real way of asking a chicken that question. And more importantly we believe that neither the cage production system nor the cage free system treats chickens inhumanely.”

Jocie said there were a number of food safety issues that they also were concerned about including salmonella, egg contact with feces and the freshness of the eggs. The university provides food for a children’s center on campus, a retirement home for priests, and pregnant women. In addition, they considered the logistical issues of their egg deliveries as well as cost factors. Many cage free eggs cost twice or three times the price of conventional cage production eggs, though this was less of an issue than many of the other considerations, she said.

Jocie said they considered the notion of offering students a choice, but that was not an efficient option for them to implement at this time. A representative from Cornell University indicated that they were test piloting a program where they would provide students a cage free choice of a meal such as an omelet, but they would charge more for it and see if there was sufficient interest to sustain that offering in the future.

The university's review took several months and will periodically be reviewed, Jocie said. For other universities and colleges facing this or similar issues, Jocie had this advice: "Do your own homework and investigation, check out your suppliers, and understand all aspects of the issue of products in your supply chain. See for yourself; don't just take other people's words for it."

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